

# Managing stakeholder influences and risks in sustainable supply chains: a systematic literature review

**Iyere Mary**

*University of Liverpool, UK, Chatham Street, Liverpool L69 7ZH, M.H.Iyere@liverpool.ac.uk*

**Misopoulos Fotios**

*University of Liverpool, UK, Chatham Street, Liverpool L69 7ZH, F.Misopoulos@liverpool.ac.uk*

## **Abstract:**

Different stakeholders with varying degrees of influences, pressure companies to adopt more sustainable practices. Hence, the aim of this paper is to investigate and analyse how stakeholder influences and risks may impact the sustainability of supply chains (SCs). Social, environmental and economic concerns are addressed by a company's engagement with different players in the supply chain. Respectively, companies become more vulnerable from exposure in their SCs and need to balance the pressures from stakeholders and sustainable practices to develop suitable risk mitigation practices. The authors use a qualitative approach by means of a systematic literature review to examine the empirical data on managing stakeholder influences and risks in sustainable supply chains. The findings of the analysis show that knowledge management, collaboration and top management commitment is a prerequisite for effectively managing various stakeholders and risks. However, further research could analyse stakeholders and the negative effects of their influences and the risks they pose.

**Keywords:** *Stakeholder management, stakeholder influences, supply chain risks, sustainable supply chains*

## **1. Introduction**

In recent decades, constant calls for openness and accountability have become the norm. As a result, sustainability has grown in importance overtime, directing initiatives to maximize internal and external stakeholder value. Consequently, numerous literary works have approached stakeholder theory identifying pressure areas for possible research development and the constantly changing 21<sup>st</sup> century environment and ever-changing policies and practices have become drivers that make organizations continuously seek value and sustainability for stakeholders in supply chains (Multaharju, 2016). To further drive this "value", organizations are taking into consideration economic, social, and environmental concerns of operations in their supply chains, considered to be the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) (Elkington, 1997) and for this study the definition of sustainability. Hence, sustainability must now be a part of every organization's business plan. Following Pagell and Wu (2009), a sustainable supply chain is one that meets all aspects of the TBL. This further suggests that sustainable supply chains are susceptible to more risks. Thus, the management of economic, environmental, and social sustainability risks is a priority in sustainable operations (Jaehn, 2016).

As competition in today's global market is increasingly focused on "supply chain against supply chain" (Gold et al., 2009; Soler et al., 2010), some organizations have been susceptible to supply chain risks. For instance, British retailers H&M and Next have admitted to child labor and paying below minimum wage in Turkish factories to Syrian refugees in 2016 (Pitel, 2016). This resulted in growing pressures from stakeholders to enhance working conditions and eliminate exploitation and slavery along their worldwide supply chains. Consequently, Gualandris et al., (2015) suggest that many companies are seeking to make their plant operations and operational performance, upstream and downstream, in the supply chain more sustainable. Thus, to ensure that each stakeholder group can fulfill their role in long-term sustainability, managers must balance the interests of various stakeholders when creating value (Hörisch et al., 2014) and manage the associated risks.

This study aims to analyze how the management of stakeholder influences and risks in a supply chain can serve as a determinant for enhanced sustainable performance. To fully embrace these dimensions of analysis, three main research objectives are investigated, such as the exploration of how stakeholder influences and risks in sustainable supply chains are managed, the examination of the effects of stakeholder influences and risks on sustainable performance in the supply chain, and the investigation of the relationship between SSCM risks and stakeholder influences.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### **Stakeholder theory**

More recently, the literature on stakeholder theory has grown in size and depth. In particular, growing social awareness of the impact of business on communities and nations have all been proposed. Stakeholder theory originally appeared in the 1980s before gaining traction in the 1990s, thanks to the works of authors such as Goodpaster (1991), Clarkson (1994,

1995), Donaldson and Preston (1995), Mitchell et al., 1997), Rowley (1997), and Frooman (1999). This theoretical approach developed itself as a new managerial paradigm among academics and management professionals, in addition to owners, workers, suppliers, and clients, other stakeholders that could be interested in a company's operations (Clarkson, 1995). Reduced to its fundamental elements, the theory comes from the separation fallacy, open question argument, the integration thesis, and the accountability principle (Freeman, et al., 2010). The authors sought to solve three key issues; (i) the issue of value creation and trade; (ii) the issue of capitalism's ethics; (iii) the issue of managerial mindset. These three issues comprise basic mechanics of stakeholder theory. According to the theory, the connection between a business and the organizations and individuals who can change or are affected by it as a unit of analysis can supply a greater chance of addressing these three issues. This stakeholder approach to business aims to provide as much value to stakeholders as possible when avoiding trade-offs.

### **Stakeholder Influences**

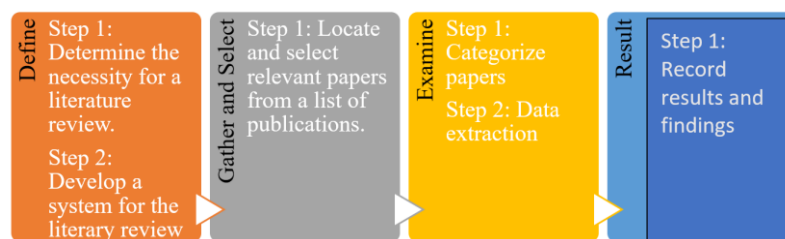
Stakeholders that have a long-term relationship with the firm are more likely to make contributions and contribute valuable resources. To this end, understanding who the stakeholders are, their distinct interest, and how they operate is critical for today's businesses. The focus should be on identifying the stakeholders who are most crucial to the organization's existence as well as satisfying their individual needs and aspirations (Hill and Jones, 1998; Helm and Mauroner, 2007; Julian et al., 2008; Baron, 2009).

### **Risk Management in Supply Chains (SCs)**

A large body of literature provides several definitions of risk in the context of supply chains (Zsidisin et al., 2004). However, the following is a popular definition of risk that has been accepted by several researchers, 'anything that disrupts or impedes the information, material or product flows from original suppliers to the delivery of the final product to the ultimate end user' (Juttner et al., 2003, p. 200). Over the last 15 years, the field of Risk Management (RM) has been characterized by milestone developments. Kogut and Kulatilaka (1994) and Huchzermeier and Cohen (1996) first explored the field from the perspective of embedded operational flexibility in supply chain network design in reducing supply chain risk, following risk as a potential chance for a firm to reap considerable benefits. Now, to ensure constant adaptation to the changing business environment, the field is concerned with the ultimate goal of avoiding the likelihood of a supply chain risk or its associated losses materializing (Kleindorfer and Saad, 2005). Carter and Rogers (2008) describe supply chain risk management in the context of their framework as a firm's ability to recognize and manage its economic, environmental, and social risks in the supply chain. Hence, following Tang (2006), in a situation where traditional initiatives are no longer successful, the author offers four fundamental techniques for managing supply chain risks (supply management, demand management, product management, and information management). Mullai (2009) also divided risk mitigation techniques into four categories: avoidance, reduction, transfer, and acceptance. This suggests RM should extend beyond the confines of a single organization. The concept tries to identify and quantify risks throughout the extended supply chain (Kleindorfer and Saad, 2005; Yu et al., 2007). Hence, where literature has identified transparency in the discussions of driving sustainability, it is not only driven by reporting to stakeholders but their active engagement, comments and inputs to ensure buy-in and enhance supply chain operations (Carter and Rogers, 2008).

## **3. Methodology**

A systematic literature study was undertaken in order to collect data from current research through dependable databases, Web of Science and Scopus. This method was selected to satisfy the qualitative structure of the research questions for this study, identify the key contributions in the field, and minimize the bias and errors in the review process (Tranfield et al., 2003). Two approaches were used: the four-stage approach adapted from Tranfield et al., (2003) in terms of the overall research design, and the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guideline was used for the purpose of selecting research papers (Page et al., 2021). The four-stage approach categorizes the research process into four stages (**Figure 1**): (i) Define; (ii) Gather and Select; (iii) Examine; (iv) Result.



**Figure 1. The four-stages of a systematic research design. Adapted from Tranfield et al., (2003).**

The first stage recognizes the necessity for a literature review and the creation of a procedure for doing one. The second stage involves locating publications and selecting papers relevant to the study context. At this stage, the PRISMA guideline was utilized to carefully identify the suitable research publications. The third stage enables for document categorization and data extraction and the last stage involves recording the results and findings.

#### 4. Discussion

Stakeholders may be considered in SC decisions to improve sustainability performance, but there is still little information on how to do so (Siems and Suering, 2021). Hence, emerges the aim to research the extent of stakeholder influences and risks in sustainable supply chains (SCs). Sustainable Supply Chain Management (SSCM) decisions are difficult tasks that include designing the supply network as well as planning, executing, and controlling the operations within it (Brandenburg et al., 2019). Yet, these decisions made within the organizational concept of SSCM were found to necessitate the successful collaboration of all stakeholders (Panigrahi and Rao, 2018), and therefore have an influence on performance and risk along the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) of sustainability. Nevertheless, with a wide literature review in accordance with stakeholder theory principles, considered to be the most challenging paradigm for measuring sustainability (Khosravi and Izbirak, 2019), the identification of stakeholders is considered a vital step not just to preserve company reputation, but also to better understand and engage them in the implementation of more sustainable SCs (Wolf, 2014). Sustainability in SCs is largely carried out through the adoption of sustainable practices rather than traditional methods (Multaharju, 2016). From a supply chain perspective this identification starts at the level of a product or service, rather than at the level of an organization or issue, as most conventional techniques do (Fritz et al., 2018). After the major stakeholders have been identified, focus should be on their requirements (Nestic et al., 2018). In order to achieve these sustainability targets, expanding sustainable practices to suppliers is crucial (Panigrahi and Rao, 2018). However, only a few research papers have recognized and incorporated all aspects of the TBL (for this study the definition of sustainability and/or sustainable practices) (Ahmed et al., 2020).

According to Panigrahi and Rao (2018), sustainable supply chain practices should be included from the very initial stage of the SC, and all parties involved should be held responsible for achieving sustainability.

Subsequently, this study reveals that many topics and issues for sustainable supply chains have been researched from a stakeholder and risk perspective. These topics are discussed under three broad categories: (i) Social sustainability (ii) Environmental sustainability; (iii) Economic sustainability.

##### **Social Sustainability**

Owing to pressure from stakeholders who want socially responsible corporate operations, the concern for social sustainability has increased among supply chain managers and researchers alike (Najjar et al., 2020).

Damert et al., (2020) created a SR-SCM framework to better comprehend the management of social concerns in supply chains, a complete study demonstrating the relationship between stakeholder pressures and communication, compliance, and supplier development strategies. The analysis of Damert et al. (2020) reveals that inconsistencies emerge across the various categories of strategies and stakeholder pressures.

##### **Risks to implementing social sustainability**

The study reveals the extent to which the adoption of sustainable supply chain practices are relatively low in developing countries in comparison to developed countries. To illustrate, the use of underage and forced labor is being scrutinized, particularly in sourcing from poor nations (Multaharju, 2016). Further, some of these barriers in developed countries (such as; UAE) include poor infrastructure, stakeholder disparity, organizational culture, uncertainty, and poor coordination (Hussain et al., 2019). All of which underline the necessity for adequate administration, policy support and supply chain standards to enhance cooperation between stakeholders and make them capable of addressing uncertainty when they need to so.

##### **Environmental sustainability**

Several environmental legislations in recent years have brought about pressure on firms for the environmental effects of their production processes to meet with specific norms or levels (Graham, 2020). Thus, understanding the supply chain's sustainability implications is becoming increasingly important as environmentally friendly goods and methods are growing more popular among stakeholders (Rane et al., 2020). Therefore, the goal of stakeholder pressure on environmental performance is to decrease the negative impact of externalities that the company creates (Ahmed et al., 2020). Taking the textile industry for instance, Panigrahi and Rao (2018), suggest that companies are aware of environmental concerns and are eager to please their consumers by increasing environmental performance through the incorporation of sustainable supply chain practices (SSCP) into their SCs. As such stakeholder and institutional pressures trigger environmentally sustainable practices (Ahmed et al., 2020). Similarly, the major factors or drivers to the implementation of environmental supply chain management processes by the company are regulatory stakeholder pressure and market pressure (Somjai et al., 2019). Early research suggested the impact on environmental practices of a proactive environmental strategy was not thoroughly evaluated (Graham, 2017), now implementation of environmental practices assures cleaner products that enable efficiency in production, manage waste disposal, reduce carbon emissions, improve the use of raw materials, and finally enhance financial performance in inventory management (Baah et al., 2021).

##### **Risks to implementing environmental sustainability**

According to Multaharju (2016), the primary environmental risk sources are; industrial pollutants, primarily from the manufacturing and transportation sectors. Since these environmental issues affects stakeholders, firms are put under pressure (Siems and Seuring, 2021). The manufacturing sector is therefore required to contribute to environmental sustainability because of its huge usage of resources, energy and greenhouse gas emissions (Baah et al., 2020).

##### **Economic sustainability**

Companies' efforts towards sustainability are certainly not motivated exclusively by altruism, and the goal of preserving and increasing profit is shared by all firms (Svensson and Wagner, 2015). The economic aspect of sustainability assesses

the firms' organizational performance, profitability, and productivity phases (Azam et al., 2021). Often, economic sustainability is solely associated with extra costs arising from the failure to adopt sustainable practice (Multaharju, 2016).

#### **Effects on sustainable performance in the supply chain**

The supply chain network ensures that companies fulfill sustainable criteria and achieve economic advantages, environmental and social effects to meet stakeholder needs (Silvestre et al., 2018). Stakeholders frequently put pressure on a company to adopt sustainable organizational methods (Cantor et al., 2014; Rebs et al., 2019). Similarly, they may increase awareness and support sustainable policy implementation in supply chains of companies (Sanchez et al., 2017). These influences and risks extend beyond the focal company, as pressures arise from upstream and downstream forcing companies to adopt sustainable practices. Although, important supporting players that do not actively engage in the flow of materials from one stage to the next are commonly overlooked by academics and practitioners (Busse et al., 2017). They necessitate the need for companies to comply with institutional constraints imposed on them by external stakeholders (Ahmed et al., 2020). Similarly, collaboration among stakeholders aid supply chains in resolving their complex social and environmental issues (Silvestre et al., 2018). Therefore, the need of managing stakeholders within supply chains has never been greater, especially because the functioning of these networks is dependent on interactions between various internal and external stakeholder groups (Hussain et al., 2019). A step farther not only identifies threats, but also discovers inefficiencies (Gualandris et al. 2015), for instance, due to the development of and reporting by certain stakeholders on specific measurement to track resource use in the supply chain, Coca-Cola achieved a 20% reduction in water and energy consumption per product unit (Kumar et al., 2012)

#### **Relationship between Sustainable Supply Chain (SSC) risks and stakeholder influences**

Both stakeholder influences and SSCR are determined to be mechanisms within SSCM that enhance social and environmental circumstances in the upstream chain of values for a sustainable supply chain (Wolf, 2014). This key opinion argues that companies, if they adopt SSCM strategies and practices react largely to external pressures, such as NGO activity or government regulation. According to the World Economic Forum (2010), in order to improve risk management companies must adopt a balanced strategy while interacting with their stakeholders. In fact, stakeholder management techniques decrease supply chain risks (Chen, 2012). Similarly, there exists a substantial relationship between an organization's cooperative planning with its stakeholders and its success in risk mitigation management (Cantor et al., 2014). In fact, the upstream suppliers pose several environmental and social sustainability issues (Multaharju, 2016). As a result, poor-sustainability-related situations in their upstream supply chains may result in SCSR for buying companies. Therefore, in order to monitor environmental and social problems and prevent penalties and disapproval by stakeholders, companies should thus implement risk management practices in the form of standards and certifications (Seuring and Mueller, 2008). Similarly, external knowledge may be proactively integrated into supply chain sustainability risks (SCSR) (Busse et al., 2017). Stakeholders can therefore persuade the company to learn about possible dangers that its suppliers are incurring when making and delivering its product. It is obvious that there is a direct link between the pressure from the stakeholders and the benefits a company obtains from its risk mitigation initiatives. Therefore, if a company had a thorough understanding of its upstream supply chain, including the specific sustainability-related circumstances, it would be better positioned to minimize SCSR, as stakeholders may be considered assets via risk identification, mitigation, and resolution along the SC, improved internal SC openness and supplier monitoring (Busse et al., 2017).

## **5. Conclusion**

Research in managing stakeholders influences and risks in sustainable supply chains has clearly just begun and its future relevance lies in bridging the gap for sustainable supply chain management in terms of value creation and sustainable development. As sustainability increases in importance, many companies are shifting from profit maximization to incorporating sustainable practices in their activities. Social, environmental, and economic concerns form the basis for these sustainable practices and the focus in terms of People, Planet, and Profit (TBL).

The stated research objectives were met based on the systematic literary review employed for this study. The results of the current investigation are depicted in the advantages from the managerial standpoint and are useful as they illustrate best practices to handle situations faced in the business world to continuously create value for stakeholders. This study suggests three key approaches for this: knowledge management, collaboration, and top management commitment. Further, there is need for academic researchers and managers alike to harmonize the data on managing stakeholder influences and risks in sustainable supply chains to make it more efficient, pointing out avenues for further research. Hence, recognizing the importance of aligning stakeholder influences and risk mitigation practices for sustainable supply chains.

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